

# Addressing Public and Private Issues in a Virtual Ethnography Study of an Open Online Community: a Reflective Paper

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the ethical consequences of employing virtual ethnography to observe human behaviour in open online communities. In this paper, we discuss the nature of the online community being studied as well as the lessons learned from both literature and also the ethical clearance application process undertaken by the research team. A key finding was that despite the community being open to the public, generally community members expected the research team to employ strategies similar to those required when dealing with a private community.

Keywords: ethics, virtual ethnography, online communities.

## 1. Field of ICT Research and Innovation.

The purpose of the study that required ethical clearance is to explore the interactions and collaborations amongst Indonesian migrant workers facilitated by an online community. In particular, the study is concerned with migrant empowerment in the online communities context. An online community can be defined as a group of people who meet, interact and collaborate in an online environment (Plant, 2004). Today, there are several emerging online technologies which can facilitate peoples' interactions and collaboration such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and mailing lists. In this paper, we only discuss ethics consequences associated with observing, following and exploring an open online community hosted in Facebook.

Facebook is an online social networking service which allows people to develop online social networks by friending and creating groups. In addition to that, Facebook also provides a tool for developing pages which can attract people to visit, like and comment. The Facebook group discussed in this paper is an open group for Indonesian migrant workers. This online community is characterized as an open community where anyone can join or be added by the members, and any one can see all messages posted in this online community. This online community looks like an open community which allows anyone, member or non-member, to see and follow the interactions.

There are several research methodologies which are suitable for researching online communities such as quantitative approaches, content analysis and virtual ethnography (Cairns, 2010; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). In this study, we adopted virtual ethnography which offers the potential of more deeply understanding online activities and the consequences of the relationships between people and technology (Boellstorff & Ebrary, 2012; Hine, 2005; Kadriye & AYDIN, 2012). Virtual ethnography was selected to aid understanding of the empowering effect of an information system, namely the Internet.

The process of virtual ethnography is similar to traditional ethnography where the researchers study peoples daily lives in a natural setting (Boellstorff & Ebrary, 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In this study, the processes of virtual ethnography consist of online observations and interviews with the participants. Online observations aim to explore the online field site, select participants, and then follow them in the online communities. In this phase, the principal researcher will visit the online community daily within a set period of time and engage in lurking, observing the technological situation, passively observing the discussion, and downloading relevant messages, images and videos posted in the online environment (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Skageby, 2011). At the end of the online observation, the researcher will conduct online interviews with the participants through email, chat room, telephone and Skype (Crichton & Kinash, 2003). In general, the data collection phase in this study will be conducted in front of a computer equipped with broadband internet access.

## **2. Who is responsible?**

*Research team:* The principal researcher is responsible for contacting and developing a working relationship with the online community leader. The principal researcher is also responsible for conducting online observations and interviewing the participants. In this study, the research team is/was? also responsible for developing an ethics application to the university ethics committee which includes completing the low risk application form, creating informed consent and developing a sample email approach, and also identifying and responding to ethical issues.

*The participants:* The participants are Indonesian migrant workers who actively participate in the online community. They will be followed by the principal researcher. Informed consent will be obtained from these participants. In addition, their uploaded messages, images and videos will be downloaded for research purposes. At the end of the online observation, they will be interviewed using online technologies for example Skype, chat rooms, email and telephone.

*Online community leader:* This leader is an individual or a group of individuals who organized the online community. In this study, the leader is contacted by the principal researcher in order to ask permission to join the online community and conduct online observation.

## **3. The Nature of the Online Community**

The online community explored in this study is an open online community hosted in Facebook and organized by an Indonesian migrant workers organization. This online community was developed to facilitate interactions amongst Indonesian migrant workers. In addition, this online community is lead by the leader of the workers' union. At 16 May 2013 there are 1384 members of this online community. They interact within the online community for discussing several common interest themes such as the migrant worker's salary policy, migrant workers recruitment procedure, and even critiquing public policies which are related to their migrant status. They also post social supports, and organize collective actions for other migrants who face challenges or difficulties. In addition, they have also uploaded several files related to migrant issues and also pictures of the union's activities in the online community internet site. However, although there are several pieces of critical information within this online community such as personal opinion, and identifiable information, this online community is set up as an open online community which anyone can see, follow the interactions, and members can add anyone to be a member without authorization from the online community leader. We consider that there are mutually supportive network of relationship amongst the online community's members which bound and attract the community members. In the other words, the online community has strong cohesiveness (Baker & Woods, 2004), and the members of the online community trust with each other.

## **4. What is the research team responsible for?**

A virtual ethnography study requires the research team to conduct ethnography in online environments which mostly consists of online observation and interviews (Boellstorff & Ebrary, 2012; Evans, 2010). In other words, the researcher conducts field work in a virtual field site such as an online community, chat rooms, and discussion forums. In a virtual ethnography, the researcher needs to collect data that is as detailed as possible including personal information posted in the virtual world, and daily activities of the participants in the field site. In a virtual ethnography study, an important issue is whether the researcher is dealing with a private or a public space.

The boundaries between public and private in the online world are not clear (Markham, 2012; Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2008; Sveningsson, 2008). Online communities should be seen as private spaces if interactions are characterised by high levels of emotion (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). In these kinds of online communities, people often share their personal information as they trust each other. In these online communities, the members have strong cohesiveness. On top of that, most people in online communities expect that their communication in the online communities should be treated as private data. Most people

assume that online communities are private spaces where the researcher should gain informed consent before conducting an observation(Thomsen, Straubhaar, & Bolyard, 1998).

Alternatively, some scholars view online communities as a public space(Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). It can be seen from the design of an online community as an open community where everyone can see the messages posted and participate in the interactions. It looks like the members should understand that all of the messages will be read by a wide audience. Therefore, there is no need to gain informed consent for observing and collecting the data(Paccagnella, 1997).

In this study, due to the nature of the virtual fieldsite, some identifiable information can be seen without permission from the owners, the researcher can lurk to observe the participants activities without giving notice to the participant. Virtual ethnography is not simply lurking, observing, and capturing messages, pictures and videos posted in the online environment, but also following peoples' online behavior. Consequently, there is a clear need to respect the people, their identities and ownership of the words that they create (Roberts, et al., 2008). From this perspective, we consider that a virtual ethnography study can be seen as an instance of human subject research because the researcher deals with human activities and behaviors in an online community setting(Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010).

Due to the nature of virtual ethnography and the virtual research site which is studied, we have treated the online community as a private space. Consequently, the research team are responsible for:

- Communicating well with the online community leader: This research needs to be communicated to the online community leader before the online observation begins. In particular, the research team must explain the research purpose using non-scientific terminology. Then, the researcher needs to ask permission for conducting online observation. On top of these, the researcher has to make sure that the online community leader understands the purpose of this research.
- Communicating well with the potential participants: the potential participants should be approached through email, or Facebook chat function. This communication aims to invite Indonesian migrant workers to participate in this research study, and explains to them that this research does not aim to influence their activities in the online community. In addition, the researcher should provide opportunity to revise their comments and responses prior to publications and the thesis.
- Maintaining the confidentiality of the participants: In this research, to protect confidentiality of the participants, the researcher needs to hide all identifying information of the participants. Specifically, data will be coded and all identifying information will be anonymous in the thesis and published materials.
- Gaining informed consent from the participants: Informed consent should be sent to the potential participants prior to the study(Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). It explains the purpose of this study, how to participate in this study, risk and confidentiality of the participants. Due to the nature of this research, verbal consent will be used.
- Storing the electronic and hardcopy of data securely.

## **5. How was the object of responsibility identified?**

The object of responsibility was identified based on the analysis of virtual ethnography and several documents for applying ethical clearance to the university including low risk application form, participant information and informed consent. In the low risk application form, it can be seen that the researcher should be aware of managing the research data including maintaining privacy and confidentiality of the participants, future use of data, procedure and protection and storing the data. In addition, the analysis of virtual ethnography methodology can be seen in this table:

Virtual Ethnography phases	Description	Object of responsibility identified
Online Observation	The researcher is asking to join the online community then identify potential participants, follow the interactions, capture uploaded messages, images and videos.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The need to get permission from the online community leader for observing the online community</li> <li>• Informed consent from the participants</li> <li>• Protecting confidentiality of the participants</li> <li>• Lurking for influencing the online community as little as possible.</li> </ul>
Interview	Due to the nature of this research, the interview will be conducted through online technology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protecting confidentiality of the participants</li> <li>• Provide opportunity to revise and confirm any comments and responds of the participants</li> </ul>

## 6. What are the lessons learned?

In this study, there are two important reasons to treat the online community as a private space.

First, from a methodological perspective, a virtual ethnography research can be seen as human subject research because it deals with exploring human online behaviour in a community setting (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). In this study we interact with people by observing their online activities and interviewing them. Therefore, we consider to protect the participants and the community as a whole. Consequently, we need to treat the online community as private space.

Secondly, based on the nature of the online community, it looks like that the community has strong cohesiveness and that the members trust with each other. Members engaged in multiple activities including sharing of information, providing each other with social support, and even criticizing governmental policies despite the fact that they may be identifiable. Despite this online community looking like a public space from which researchers can observe and capture the messages without participants's permission, the sensitive nature of these activities suggest that members expect that we treat their community as private space. Therefore, the research team felt obliged to respect them and protect their privacy and confidentiality by gaining informed consent before we capture their interactions in the online community.

Treating the online community as a private space helps us to engage within the online community sympathetically by communicating with the online community leader or organizer prior to online observation. This strategy allows us to not only obtain permission from the group leader but also assists with establishing social contact. Although, the targeted online community is an open online community, gaining permission from the community leader and informed consent from the participants will help us to engage in the online community sympathetically. The permission letter was also required by the ethics committee.

Identifying appropriate ways to approach the community can help the researcher to engage sympathetically with the online community and enhance the intimacy of the researcher with the online community (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010). In this research we will also conduct a conversation through Facebook with the potential participants in addition to sending them a formal informed consent form and email. This extra communication will also emphasize to the participants that we have contacted the community leader prior to inviting them to participate.

As ethical considerations, we also need to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. In an online environment, we found that some of the participants use user name instead of real name. However, they upload some personal information in their Facebook profile. Although user names are not real names, using user names is not enough to protect participant's privacy and confidentiality. It looks like user names can be used to track the real names (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). Therefore, in our study, data will be coded and all identifying information will be anonymous in the thesis and published materials.

The perspective of treating the community as private space aligned with the university research ethics standard which requires the researcher to gain informed consent when conducting human subject research. In addition, this decision is also aligned with guidelines for conducting Internet research from the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham, 2012). In that publication, however, they emphasize that the description of private or public is culturally ambiguous and changing; but the main principle is that the researcher should respect and protect the community. As this community can be seen as a vulnerable community, we consider that we need to protect the community (Markham, 2012). The decision to treat the online community as private space can help to develop respect of the ownership of words, individuals and the community (Roberts, et al., 2008).

In conclusion, studying an open online community hosted in Facebook, using virtual ethnography, needs development of respect for the individuals and community. Treating the community as a private space achieves this goal. The consequent processes require permit letters from the community leader prior to observing the online community and gaining informed consent from the participants. In addition, we need to effectively communicate with the participants and engage in the community sympathetically as we will be their Facebook friend, not just a researcher who explores their online behavior. We believe that engaging with the community sympathetically will help us be culturally accepted in the community. This approach aligns with AoIR's ethics guideline which emphasizes the need to protect the community and respect their ownership of the words (Markham, 2012).

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